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Imagined Intergroup Contact: Theory, Paradigm and Practice

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Abstract

In this article, we outline a new implementation of intergroup contact theory: imagined intergroup contact. The approach combines 50 years of research into the effects of contact with recent advances in social cognition. It represents both a versatile experimental paradigm for investigating the extended and indirect impacts of social contact, as well as a flexible and effective tool for practitioners and policy makers in their efforts to promote tolerance for multicultural diversity. We describe the theoretical basis for imagined contact effects, document emerging empirical support, and provide a practical guide for researchers wishing to adopt the paradigm. Finally, we discuss the potential application of imagined contact in educational contexts, and how it could be integrated with existing approaches to provide maximally effective strategies for improving intergroup relations.

A highly cited declaration from the 1947 constitution of UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – is that 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'. This basic sentiment is shared by those of us seeking social psychological solutions to the problem of prejudice, and it is a sentiment that directed our focus in writing this article. Fifty years since Gordon Allport's seminal book *The Nature of Prejudice*, we now understand UNESCO's declaration to be a basic truth of social reality. Psychological processes are critical determinants in the formation and perseverance – and perhaps reduction – of prejudice, discrimination, and social conflict.

Arguably, Allport's most important contribution was his specification of *the contact hypothesis*, the idea that to reduce prejudice, we must bring groups together (under the right conditions). The hypothesis has been confirmed: we now know that the experience of contact has a clear psychological impact that is reflected positively in intergroup attitudes. This article is about a new implementation of the contact hypothesis, an implementation that illustrates the inherent power and flexibility of

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contact, and how the very concept of contact itself can embody a positive orientation towards others. Our approach is based on the mental simulation of contact experiences, and the idea that simply *imagining* intergroup contact with an outgroup member may be enough elicit more positive intergroup attitudes. In what follows, we map our reasoning in developing the imagined contact paradigm, we discuss emerging supportive evidence, and we consider the theoretical, empirical and practical implications of this new approach to reducing prejudice. For researchers seeking to use the paradigm, we provide a practical guide to implementing the methodology, and we offer an agenda for future research. For practitioners and policy makers, we provide a basis for systematic evaluation and potential application of this new, unique, and highly flexible intervention strategy.

Intergroup Contact Theory

One of the most successful and influential contributions to social issues research has been Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis (Harrington & Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1993). The hypothesis is now a well-specified theory that documents the psychological processes that produce a positive impact from social contact (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). Allport originally asserted that maximally positive outcomes will be observed if the contact involves equal status between the groups, common goals, no competition, and institutional support. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of over 500 studies has recently qualified this assertion. We now know that while the above may be facilitating conditions, they are not necessary conditions. There is a fundamental, robust, and positive impact of contact on intergroup attitudes regardless of target group, age group, geographical area, or contact setting.

Extended Intergroup Contact

Despite the clear benefits of intergroup contact, it has one limitation: it can only reduce prejudice when social groups and group members are afforded the *opportunity* to engage in contact (e.g., Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007c; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, & Vonafakou, 2008). Unfortunately, there are many examples of problematic intergroup relations where few such opportunities exist. Many Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland comprise a very low percentage of residents from the other community, and only 5% of Northern Irish children attend mixed Catholic-Protestant schools (Census, 2001). In the United States, segregation of Latino and White communities remains pervasive (Martin, 2006), and the average White person lives in a predominantly White neighborhood with less than 10% Black residents (Logan, 2001). There are many other examples of more extreme segregation from the 'West Bank Wall' in Israel to the 'Green Line' in Cyprus

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(Pettigrew, 2008). In all of these circumstances, interventions that involve direct intergroup contact may be very difficult to establish. Yet, it is in precisely these settings where contact interventions are needed the most.

A solution to both lack of opportunity for contact as well as intervention-based impracticalities is to establish contact in an *indirect* manner. According to the *extended* contact hypothesis, learning that an ingroup member has a close relationship with an outgroup member can vicariously improve one's own attitudes towards the outgroup (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Extended contact has been found to exert a positive impact on attitudes and outgroup stereotyping via the development of positive attitudinal ingroup norms, similarity to self and reduced anxiety with both children (Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006) and adults (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Turner et al., 2008). There are undoubted benefits of extended contact and situations in which it literally extends the power and scope of the contact hypothesis. Yet, it cannot fully side step the opportunity for contact issue. While one does not need to engage in contact oneself to reap the benefits, actual contact is still required *somewhere* in one's wider social network (be it with one's friend, family member, or just another ingrouper). If segregation defines the relationship between communities, one simply may not know of *anyone* who has anything to do with the outgroup. In short, in highly segregated societies, even extended contact might be in short supply.

But there might be an opportunity to capitalize on the benefits of contact, even when direct or extended contact is impractical or impossible. Extended contact was such an important theoretical contribution because it revealed the power in the *concept* of contact: that direct experiences are not necessary for contact to exert a positive effect. Extended contact shows us that there is something about the idea of contact, mentally articulated in the form of knowledge about experiences of others, that has an impact on intergroup attitudes. What if this concept alone was enough, unbounded by actual experience anywhere in one's social network ... what if simply *imagining* intergroup contact could improve intergroup attitudes?

Imagined Intergroup Contact

The mind's tremendous capacity for imagination has captivated psychologists since the earliest enquiries (Galton, 1883; James, 1890) and it is a concept that has enjoyed enduring appeal. Mental imagery elicits similar emotional and motivational responses as the real experience (Dadds, Bovbjerg, Redd, & Cutmore, 1997), and neuropsychological studies have shown that it employs similar neurological mechanisms as memory, emotion, and motor control (Farah, 1989; Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001). Functionally, mental imagery serves as an important element in the selection, rehearsal, preparation, and planning of goal-directed behavior (D. Marks, 1999). Developmental psychologists have employed mental simulation as a tool

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to study children's symbolic capacities to envisage the future and evaluate their skills to set goals, make plans, fantasize, or play (Singer, 1972). Clinical psychologists use mental imagery as a tool for clients, for instance in phobias to reduce an image's emotional power (Wolpe, 1958). Cognitive psychologists have studied the effects of mental imagery on memory and education (Paivio, 1968). Personality psychologists have shown how people's visions of their future selves guide their actions and self-perceptions (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

There is precedent for the more specific idea that imagining *social* scenarios can impact on attitudes and behavior. Research has shown that simply imagining a particular social context can evoke cognitive and behavioral effects similar to those experienced in the context itself (Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, & Darley, 2002). Garcia et al. found that participants who imagined a crowded situation exhibited significantly fewer helping behaviors compared to control participants, in line with the typical bystander apathy effect. Other research has yielded similar findings. For instance, individuals asked to imagine a strong woman later showed less implicit gender stereotyping compared to those who had simply imagined a vacation (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001). Thus, social scenarios can elicit attitudinal and behavioral effects similar to those arising from direct experience. This is a psychological phenomenon with significant import, and one which, we believe, is highly applicable to perhaps the most 'social' situation there is: social interaction.

Imagined intergroup contact involves mentally stimulating a social interaction between an ingroup member and an outgroup member. More specifically, the idea is that simulating a positive contact experience will activate concepts that we normally associate with successful interactions with members of out groups. According to Garcia et al. (2002), imagery increases the accessibility of abstract concepts associated with that social context. Imagining being in a crowd, for instance, activates feelings of being 'lost in a crowd' and 'unaccountable', feelings which are associated with less helping behavior in real situations. Similarly, imagining intergroup contact should activate concepts that we normally associate with successful interactions with members of unknown groups, such as feeling more comfortable and less apprehensive about the prospect of future contact with that group. In addition to these relatively automatic activations, when people imagine intergroup contact, they should engage in conscious processes that parallel the processes involved in actual intergroup contact. They may, for example, actively think about what they would learn about the outgroup member, how they would feel during the interaction, and how this would influence their perceptions of that outgroup member and the outgroup more generally. In turn, this should lead to more positive evaluations of the outgroup, similar to the effects of face-to-face contact (for a more detailed account of the theory underlying the imagined contact proposition, see Crisp & Turner, in press).

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Instructional Set and Task Variants

Before we discuss supportive evidence for the imagined contact proposition we have outlined, in this section we describe the basic paradigm and variants we have used. We are keen to make the imagined contact paradigm widely accessible for adoption by those interested in investigating and evaluating its theoretical and practical potential. The basic imagined contact instructional set we have used is very simple:

> We would like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting [an outgroup] stranger for the first time. Imagine that the interaction is positive, relaxed and comfortable.

There are two key elements to this instruction. First is the simulation element. We have found that running through the mental script of an interaction is critical for observing positive effects (thinking, in contrast, of just an outgroup member in the absence of any simulated interaction has no positive effects on attitudes, R. Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007a; Expt. 2). Second is the positive tone of the interaction. We know that a positive tone is important for direct contact, and it is the same for imagined contact. Empirically, we have shown that imagined contact works better when it is positive compared to neutral (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Expt. 1). Indeed, with no specified evaluative tone, imagined contact could simply result in an imagined *negative* interaction, which would have a correspondingly negative impact on attitudes. We also note that previous research has sometimes included the phrase 'imagine that you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the stranger' (Turner et al., 2007a; Expts. 2 and 3) or 'interesting and positive things' (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Expts. 1 and 3) but sometimes not (Stathi & Crisp, 2008, Expt. 2). We have found this phrase to make no difference to the effectiveness of an imagined contact. R. Turner et al. (2007a; Expt. 1) also included the phrase 'Imagine their appearance, the conversation that follows and, from what you learn, all the different ways you could classify them into different groups of people.' A reviewer of this piece rightly pointed out that this could produce a multiple categorization effect (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007), which could account for the attitude change observed. However, as with the other variants noted above, this phrase made no difference to the basic effect. This is not to say that changing the instructional set has no impact; on the contrary, as we discuss below, the paradigm lends itself to the exploration of task variants that can have specific impacts on specific outcome measures. What is important here is that the core instructional set, comprising the two key elements: (1) *simulation* and (2) a *positive tone*, appears to fulfil the necessary and sufficient conditions to observe positive outcomes.

Control conditions are also critical to experimental investigations using the imagined contact paradigm. We have typically used a form of the

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following in order to create a pleasant scene (akin to a positive interaction), but with no reference to groups:

> We would like you to take a minute to imagine an outdoor scene. Try to imagine aspects of the scene (e.g., is it a beach, a forest, are there trees, hills, what's on the horizon).

Mindful that this might not control for more generalized positive effects of social interaction *per se*, we have also used a version simulating positive social interaction with a non-relevant group (i.e., a positive interaction with a non-relevant stranger versus a positive interaction with a relevant stranger; Stathi & Crisp, 2008, Expt. 2). This rules out positive affect arising from generalized social interaction as an explanation for imagined contact effects.

In all conditions, participants are given exactly one minute to imagine the scene. To reinforce the instructions, we then typically asked participants to write several lines describing the scenario they imagined.

Empirical Support

We have found the instructional sets outlined above to be highly effective at promoting positive outcomes for a range of groups and in a range of settings. Here, we briefly discuss the key findings from this research program.

In three studies, R. Turner et al. (2007a) found that participants who were asked to imagine a positive interaction with an elderly person or gay man subsequently expressed more positive attitudes, and stereotyped less, than participants who did not. Two studies showed that young participants who imagined a scenario in which they engaged in a short positive interaction with an elderly person showed less ingroup favoring bias in attitudinal evaluations. This was the case whether participants imagined contact compared to simply imagining an outdoor scene (Expt. 1), or compared to simply thinking about an elderly person (Expt. 2; i.e., an elderly prime, no simulated interaction). In a third study, heterosexual men who imagined talking to a homosexual man subsequently evaluated homosexual men in general more positively, and stereotyped homosexual men less (perceived less homogeneity), than participants who imagined an outdoor scene. Consistent with much research on actual contact (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Paolini et al., 2004; Turner et al., 2007c; Voci & Hewstone, 2003), this positive attitude change was mediated by reduced intergroup anxiety in the imagined contact condition.

We have also shown that imagined contact can improve, not only explicit, but implicit attitudes. This is important because it counters the claim that imagined contact effects may be due to demand characteristics (i.e., participants guessing what the task is *meant* to do, or what they believe is socially desirable responding). We have, in fact, found no evidence to suggest that imagined contact effects can be explained in this way. Typically,

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no participants report any awareness of the experimental hypotheses at feedback (for instance, in Turner et al., 2007a, only four participants reported any suspicion about the purpose of the experiment and not one participant successfully identified the aims of the experiment). Nonetheless, in order to better rule out this explanation, we have examined the effects of imagined contact on implicit measures of attitudes. In two experiments (focusing on implicit attitudes towards British Muslims and the Elderly), Turner and Crisp (forthcoming) asked participants to complete an Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGee, & Schwartz, 1998) after imagining contact with an elderly stranger (compared to a control condition). The IAT is a computerized procedure that enables an indirect assessment of prejudiced attitudes. As such, it is less prone to participant's desire to give socially desirable, rather than 'true', opinions. Consistent with earlier findings, imagined contact reduced implicit bias towards both target groups, thus ruling out the demand characteristics explanation for the effect.

Stathi and Crisp (2008) tested the paradigm with several new populations and showed that imagined contact leads not only to improved attitudes, but also to greater projection of positive personality traits to the outgroup. Projection is a process by which attitudes and traits are attributed to others and can constitute a fundamental 'cognitive basis for ingroup favoritism' (p. 42; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; see also Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996). This is because projection of positive self traits to similar others (i.e., the ingroup) is generally stronger for ingroups than outgroups (Clement & Krueger, 2002). In three studies, Stathi and Crisp found that imagined contact did indeed lead to more positive trait projection to outgroups following imagined contact, compared to controls, with a variety of target groups including Mestizos and indigenous groups in Mexico and International Students in the United Kingdom.

Imagined contact can also reduce the impact of negative self-stereotypes on quantitative performance (the *stereotype threat* effect, Steele, 1997). Research with older people has found that self-stereotyping affects a range of cognitive abilities consistent with the expectation that cognitive performance declines with age (Hess, Hinson, & Statham, 2004; Levy, 1996). The application of imagined contact to this domain was based on the premise that intergenerational contact is generally limited (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005) and that actual contact has been found to reduce threat effects in older people through reduced anxiety (Abrams, Eller, & Bryant, 2006). Abrams et al. (in press) hypothesized that imagined contact would serve a protective function for older people exposed to contexts where they might otherwise suffer performance decrements. Supporting this hypothesis, we found that older people (all aged over 60) who imagined a brief social interaction with a young stranger (compared to an outdoor scene) were subsequently immune to the typically depleting effects of a threat comparison on cognitive test performance (an effect again mediated by reduced anxiety).

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Maximizing Effective Outcomes

The effectiveness of imagined contact is moderated by certain conditions. Although imagining contact has generally been found to improve attitudes towards outgroups the effects are maximized when the imagined scenario is *positive* as opposed to neutral (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Expt. 1). These findings are in line with the intergroup contact literature, where one of the key facilitators is that intergroup contact should be perceived as positive by the interacting members (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Voci & Hewstone, 2003; Eller & Abrams, 2004). Mere contact without a positive component, although it has generally been found to have a direct negative relationship with prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) can in some cases lead to an increase in negative attitudes (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000).

Numerical or status differences between groups have also been found to influence the effectiveness of imagined contact. Contact research has generally demonstrated that minority group members react differently to contact experiences compared to majority group members (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Tropp and Pettigrew's meta-analysis (2005) revealed that, overall, the relationship between contact and prejudice is weaker among minority groups than among majority groups (see also Tropp, 2003). This is likely because minority groups tend to be more suspicious of majorities (Pinel, 2002) and experience more anxiety at the thought of intergroup contact (Plant & Devine, 2003). Stathi and Crisp (2008; Expt. 1) tested if minorities are more resistant to the benefits of imagined contact than majorities using a sample of two ethnic groups in Mexico, Mestizos (ethnic majority group), and Indigenous people (ethnic minority group). The results confirmed that, as in real contact situations, imagined contact was more efficient in changing attitudes in the case of the majority group. Specifically, majority group members projected more positive self-traits to the outgroup following positive imagined contact than did minority group members.

A further factor that has been found to play a critical role in the effectiveness of imagined contact is the level of identification with one's ingroup. High ingroup identification is sometimes associated with intergroup bias (e.g., Brown, Maras, Masser, Vivian, & Hewstone, 2001). We found that imagined contact was more successful at improving attitudes for participants who did not identify strongly with their national ingroup (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Expt. 2). This is likely because higher identifiers have a tendency to protect their ingroup by differentiating themselves from relevant outgroups (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). For example, higher (but not lower) identifiers differentiate themselves from outgroups *even more* under conditions designed to promote common goals and a sense of shared identity (Crisp & Beck, 2005; Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006). Given this, it seems reasonable that the effects of imagined contact have

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a less pronounced impact on higher compared to lower identifiers. This is not to say that imagined contact cannot be successfully applied to highly identifying group members. Rather, we suggest that educators and policy makers intending to implement such interventions recognize that different approaches to promoting positive relations might mean different things to different people (for a discussion of this issue, see Crisp, 2006).

We have proposed a solution to the problem of higher identifiers rejecting the imagined contact intervention. Given that for higher identifiers, the 'collective' self is typically more pronounced than the 'personal' self (J. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), encouraging a shift in focus from the collective to the *personal* self may facilitate the effects of contact-based interventions (see Stathi & Crisp, 2008). In Stathi and Crisp (Expt. 3), we primed a personal level interaction by asking people to generate positive personal characteristics before imagining intergroup contact (based on a method of making personal identity salient used by Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & J. Turner, 1999). Consistent with the above theorizing, imagined contact promoted more positive outgroup perceptions when the personal, versus collective, self was salient.

A similar, pre-contact task may also work for minority group members, who are also sometimes found to perceive contact with different groups as threatening (Stephan et al., 2000). Interestingly, our observation that personal self-salience facilitates imagined contact effects is consistent with recent research in the actual contact literature that shows intergroup friendship – a personal self-focused form of contact – is highly effective at promoting positive attitudes (Pettigrew, 1998; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007b; Turner et al., 2007c). In sum, if the personal self is activated prior to the application of the intervention, any identity threat associated with the thought of intergroup interaction should be mitigated and the bias reducing effects of imagined contact can be realized.

Prospects for Theoretical and Empirical Development

While imagined contact provides an exciting new approach to improving attitudes, we should temper our enthusiasm with an important qualification. The simulation of contact experiences is unlikely to have *as* powerful effects on intergroup attitudes as real contact. We already know that direct experiences provide a stronger basis for attitude formation than indirect experiences (Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983). Recent comparisons between direct and extended contact showed just this: actual contact is stronger at reducing prejudice than extended contact (Paolini, Hewstone, & Cairns, 2007; Turner et al., 2007b). Imagined contact, being arguably more indirect than extended contact, may have a weaker effect compared to actual direct contact on attitude change.

On the other hand, we believe that the real potential in imagined contact is not as an intervention for attitude change, but as a means of

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promoting an interest and intention to engage in future actual contact. We have argued that the key limitation of actual or even extended contact is the lack of opportunity for contact – but we do not advocate imagined contact as a *replacement* for these approaches. We know that positive real contact has a highly significant impact on intergroup attitudes. The value in imagined contact will be in its ability to encourage people to seek out contact, remove contact inhibitions that go hand in hand with existing prejudices, and prepare people to engage outgroups with an open mind. In this way, imagined contact might be highly valuable as a 'first step' on the route towards reconciliation and reduced prejudice. We therefore recommend that one of the variables that ongoing research should focus on is *intentions* to engage in future intergroup interactions.

How might imagined contact work incrementally as a means of preparing people for contact? One characteristic associated with lower levels of intergroup contact is higher intergroup anxiety (Plant & Devine, 2003). Imagined contact may act like an anxiety-buffer mechanism, functioning in a way similar to systematic desensitization in clinical behavioral therapies. Systematic desensitization is a type of behavioral therapy used for the treatment of phobias and anxiety disorders. It works by gradually exposing patients to the object or situation that causes the phobia until it becomes tolerated. The phobic reaction is progressively reduced because of a decrease in the resultant anxiety (Yates, 1975). Exposure to the phobic stimuli is found to sufficiently reduce anxiety and fear-related behaviors and emotions (Marks, 1975). Simulation triggers the likely emotions involved in the action, so that one can anticipate emotional states and develop a degree of control over them; an idea that resonates with the finding that imagined contact reduces intergroup anxiety (Turner et al., 2007a). Imagined contact may progressively increase willingness to engage in actual contact or, when given the opportunity, enable people to benefit more from it. Developing the link between systematic desensitization therapies and imagined contact interventions would be an intriguing avenue for future research.

As well as reducing anxiety, imagined contact may promote intentions and raise the likelihood of future contact via a cognitive route. Carroll (1978) argues that the impact of simulation on intentions and future likelihood estimates can be attributable to the 'availability heuristic' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). The heuristic focuses on the ease in which one can 'bring to mind' an event, issue, person, etc. (Sherman & Anderson, 1987). Once an individual imagines a hypothetical future behavior, the subjective likelihood of that behavior is increased due to the reliance on the availability heuristic. Specifically, simulation provides a set of accessible cues that are available to guide behaviors and expectations in subsequent actual encounters. Testing a possible dual-route model featuring affective (anxiety) and cognitive (cue accessibility) pathways to attitudes and contact intentions will be an important focus for future research.

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Prospects for Policy and Practice

Imagined contact represents a highly flexible implementation of contact theory – no actual or extended contact is required, it is cheap, easy to use, and effective. We next discuss the potential for its application as an intervention in educational settings in the context of the broader canvass of existing anti-discriminatory programs.

School-based interventions

The majority of programs used to change intergroup attitudes in educational settings can be broadly divided into two types: the multicultural curricula approach (Appl, 1996) and the anti-racist approach (Dei, 1996). Multicultural curricula programs involve teaching children about the culture and lifestyle of minority groups (e.g., Sleeter & Grant, 1994). The idea is that if prejudice is caused by ignorance, then teaching children about the outgroup is the solution (Appl, 1996). However, this perspective is based on the assumption that children are *passive* recipients of information. In fact, evidence suggests that children, like adults, actively construct schemas, based on their own observations, which they then use to understand and interpret their social world (Piaget, 1970). Accordingly, exposure to attitude-incongruent information does not simply modify the attitude. Rather, people have a tendency to forget, distort, or ignore such information, leaving the original attitude intact (Neuberg, 1996; Rothbart & John, 1985). Consistent with these critiques, multicultural curricula programs have not consistently achieved desired reductions in prejudice (e.g., Koeller, 1977; Lessing & Clarke, 1976).

An alternative and increasingly popular program involves encouraging children to recognize, and confront, prejudice in themselves and in society (Short & Carrington, 1996; Walker, 1989). This is often described as the *anti-racist approach* (Dei, 1996). Anti-racist programs tend to result in greater attitude change than multicultural programs (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; McGregor, 1993; Turner & Brown, 2008). However, even the impact of 'successful' interventions is often small or diminishes quickly over time (Bigler, 1999). Moreover, there is a paucity of research into the effects of anti-racist programs, a fact that is concerning in light of the frequency with which they are used (Aboud & Levy, 2000).

Both multicultural curricula and anti-racist interventions are typically developed from intuition and creative insight (Aboud & Levy, 2000), rather than research-led theory, and this could be part of what contributes to their uncertain effectiveness. In contrast, interventions developed from contact theory are based on methods that have been tried and tested in controlled laboratory settings. This research has show us that unlike traditional interventions, contact-based strategies generate positive, affective, emotional responses to the outgroup, which seems critical in generating

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strong and lasting attitude change (Pettigrew, 1998). They also involve *active* thought rather than the passive receipt of information, which is advocated by educational psychologists over more passive approaches (Randi & Corno, 2000).

But there are two difficulties in applying contact-based interventions. First, bringing together members of different groups is likely to be costly and time consuming. Second, as we have noted throughout this article, such direct or even extended contact interventions can only be applied in contexts where group members have the opportunity (or indeed the inclination) for contact in the first place. Imagined contact, however, may offer the means of effectively implementing contact theory in educational settings.

Applying imagined contact

We have shown that imagining a positive interaction with an outgroup member not only improves attitudes towards a variety of different outgroups, but also reduces anxiety at the prospect of interacting with those groups (e.g., Abrams et al., in press; Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Turner et al., 2007a; Turner & Crisp, forthcoming). To date, imagined contact has been tested in the laboratory, but we believe that it would readily transfer to an educational setting. It involves only a short, simple task and can be implemented with little obvious expense. It also has the potential to be integrated with traditional educational interventions (i.e., multicultural curricula and the anti-racist approaches). Importantly, while traditional approaches involve discussing cultural characteristics of outgroup members, or discussing the problems of racist attitudes and behavior, they are essentially passive and involve being told what to think by a teacher. In contrast, when people imagine an intergroup interaction, they are likely to *actively* engage in conscious processes that parallel the processes involved in actual intergroup contact. They may, for example, think about what they would learn about the outgroup member, how they would feel during the interaction, and how this would influence their perceptions of that outgroup member and the outgroup more generally.

We do not argue that traditional approaches should be abandoned. Rather, they might be effectively integrated with imagined contact. Thus, rather than listen to a teacher extol the benefits of multiculturalism and tolerance, students could be asked to imagine having an interaction with an outgroup member in which they learn new and interesting things about the other culture (a more active way of learning about multiculturalism), or where they learn what it might be like to be the victim of discrimination (a more active anti-racism approach). Participants could then discuss as a group what they learned from the imagination task in order to reinforce its impact. This type of exercise would introduce the same topics as the traditional approaches but in a more active and interactive way. To date, there are relatively few social psychological interventions to

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reduce prejudice that have been implemented in schools. However, we believe that imagined contact – either alone or in combination with existing interventions – can provide a simple and practical means of incorporating social psychological content into educational interventions.

From imagined to actual contact

As we have noted above, imagined contact has advantages over direct contact as a potential intervention because it is cheaper and easier to use and is not reliant on opportunity for contact. It also has a benefit over extended contact because it can be used even in highly segregated settings where people are not even part of a broader social network in which there are outgroup members. But, in isolation, it is also likely to yield a lesser impact on attitudes and behaviors than more direct strategies. We therefore believe that it might be most effective in combination with these existing strategies. We have shown that imagining contact reduces the fears and negative expectations that can poison face-to-face contact, and may therefore help to *prepare* people for a successful intergroup encounter. We have also suggested that imagined contact might have a substantive impact on intentions to engage in future contact, and the perceived likelihood that future contact will be positively toned. For these reasons, we believe that one way in which imagined contact might be usefully applied is as the first stage in a programmatic intervention that also involves the introduction of extended and direct contact interventions at a later stage. In particular, if participants spend some time imagining intergroup contact before personally engaging in such an encounter, their levels of intergroup anxiety will be lower (affective route) and their expectations more positive (cognitive route) when they subsequently embark on the encounter. This will increase the likelihood that actual intergroup contact, when it is introduced, will result in strong, positive and long-lasting attitude change.

Conclusions

In this article, we have described the theoretical basis, emerging support, and practical potential of a new intervention strategy for improving intergroup attitudes: imagined intergroup contact. The approach has four key strengths. First, it can be used where actual or extended contact is impractical. Second, it can be used as an inexpensive, easily applied implementation of contact theory. Third, it is safe: properly structured imagined contact allows people to engage in simulated contact without intergroup anxiety (the affective route). Fourth, it may increase future contact intentions and open minds to the potential of positive relations (the cognitive route). Imagined contact is a simple yet effective means of promoting more positive intergroup relations; it is a firmly grounded intervention with

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significant potential for policy makers and educators; and, we believe, it the strongest possible testament to the power, flexibility and enduring appeal of the contact hypothesis.

Short Biography

Richard Crisp is Professor of Psychology at the University of Kent. His current research focuses on the impact of mental imagery on attitudes and behavior, as well as the antecedents and consequences of social and cultural diversity. He read Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford and received his PhD from Cardiff University in 1999. He has published over 50 articles and chapters, as well as an edited volume on *Multiple Social Categorization* (with Miles Hewstone) and a textbook, *Essential Social Psychology* (with Rhiannon Turner). He is past recipient of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues *Louise Kidder Early Career Award* (2003) and the British Psychological Society's *Spearman Medal* (2006). He sits on the editorial boards of the *British Journal of Social Psychology* and *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

Sofia Stathi is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Kent. She holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham and a BSc from the University of Crete. She has published in journals such as the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Her research interests broadly involve intergroup contact, majority-minority relations, and the reduction of prejudice. She has conducted research looking at a variety of inter-nation and inter-ethnic relations involving groups such as International and British students in UK Universities, British Muslims, and Indigenous people and Mestizos in Mexico.

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